



A Basket Garden

Have you often heaved a sigh and said, “Oh how I would like a few fresh veggies but I have no place to have a garden.” A quick, easy-to-make place for a few vegetables is a basket garden. Requirements for a basket garden include 4-5 hours of morning sun, permission to install a hook for the basket, and a willingness to do research. Of course, you will also need to live where a patio or balcony or an east window is available.

STARTING OUT

To begin, call a garden center, not a discount store, for the price of a wire basket with long wire “handles”, an open weave, and be at least 10 inches in diameter. Get the largest basket your budget can afford. At the same time, purchase these items: a plastic pot that fits in the basket, sphagnum moss, NOT PEAT MOSS, to line the basket; small bags of potting soil (either *Black Gold* or *Sunshine*); a small bag of compost; the plants or seeds to put in the basket; and the hook. Do not get bags of MULCH as they contain many chunks of woody pieces. When this material begins to decompose in the planter, it will rob the plants of nutrients. If you do not get the *Black Gold* mix, then purchase a small bag of bat guano to mix with the soil.

Carefully research what kinds of plants will grow in a confined space, that is, plants that will vine, or do not grow very tall. One idea for an herb basket is trailing rosemary, purple leaf basil, thyme, and trailing oregano. Thyme seldom grows above 4 inches, and comes in “flavors”, such as lemon. If the basket is large enough, add a few onions or garlic chives. The thin leaves can be snipped for salads or egg dishes.

Vegetable packet seeds state the time for the seed to mature. Look for these words: baby, compact, dwarf, or midget. These words indicate the plant and fruit will be small. Purchase seedlings of pepper and tomato. Choose small varieties. Patio tomatoes are too large for a basket; instead try cherry or yellow pear tomato. Or buy seeds and raise your own plants.

At the garden center, ask for a plant hook that screws into the ceiling or wall. Be sure to get the brand that rotates, so that each side of the basket can have access to sun. Secure the hook before filling the basket.

HOW TO PLANT

Soak the sphagnum moss in water for several hours. When it is to be used, squeeze it until no more water drips. Now line the basket with 2-3 inches of moss. Let the basket sit in the sink or a bucket until ready to plant, as it will continue dripping. Estimate how much soil will fill the basket. Put this in another bucket or pan and add two handfuls each of bat guano and compost (if not using *Black Gold* potting soil) and enough water to dampen the soil, but not puddle. Stir thoroughly until the soil will lightly clump in your hand. Pour water over the potted plants to loosen the soil.

Place newspapers on a table or chair. Assemble all the pieces to be used. Fill the basket halfway with soil. Lay one of the moistened trailing potted plants on its side in one hand. GENTLY tap on the bottom and sides of the pot with your other hand until the plant slides out. The soil should stay in a ball around the root. Loosen the soil slightly by pinching the bottom of the root ball. Some soil will fall away. Place the trailing plants on the sides of the basket away from the handle. Add soil. Be sure the roots are in the soil, not the moss.

Tenderly place more soil in the basket around the roots of these two plants, keeping the soil from covering the stem. When the soil reaches 3/4 of the way to filling the basket, place the two upright plants

OPPOSITE the trailing plants. Now finish filling the basket, very gently pressing down on the soil, until the plants do not topple over. Add more soil, if necessary.

Enough moisture should be in the moss, the soil, and the root ball to last two days. Poke a finger in the soil here and there, through the moss too, making sure the soil is DAMP. Roots need to breath and can drown if too much water is present. Now hang the basket where morning sun can reach it for 4-5 hours and light for 2 more hours. Sun shining through glass is hotter than being out in the open, and so intense the plants could burn. Water every 2 or 3 days. If a hot dry wind blows through the area, check the basket for moisture. Potted plants dry very quickly. When the plants wilt, the harvest will be reduced, and perhaps misshapen. Keep the basket evenly moist.

OTHER PLANTS

Other kinds of plants can be used for a basket. Experiment. Try an all-lettuce basket, using various kinds and sizes of greens. Plant nasturtium seeds in the sides of the basket to trail downward. Use the flowers and new leaves in salads, or candy them. Purchase Johnny-Jump-Ups, the small-faced violas, or other tiny flowering plants. Only viola and nasturtium flowers are edible.

Try a legume basket. Plant peas in the sides to trail, poking holes in the moss, and use bush beans on the top. Do not plant onion or garlic with legumes. Use other kinds of trailing flowers, such as lobelia, alyssum, etc. **DO NOT EAT THESE FLOWERS OR THEIR LEAVES.** If you wish to plant edible flowers, go to the library and check out a book about edible flowers. Ask at the garden center for flower suggestions. Flowers, either in the basket or in pots near-by, will attract predators who eat pests, and provide nectar for the insects that pollinate the vegetables.

FERTILIZER

What about feeding the basket? To keep the plants healthy, purchase a good brand of fish emulsion. **READ THE LABEL** Look for ingredients such as sludge, which you do not want to use. Or purchase fish or kelp meal and make your own liquid fertilizer with water. Another method is to put two cups of compost in a gallon of water to make compost tea. Let it soak for 2-3 days before using it as fertilizer. Use 2-4 tbsp. to a pint of water and either spray the leaves or use as part of the watering. As the basket might leak when watering or fertilizing, set it in the sink for an hour or so. Clear plastic trays are available at garden centers for under the basket. Amendments (fertilizers) can be added to the basket every two weeks. When using the above fertilizers as foliar feeding, (spraying the leaves with a solution) spray when the sun will not touch the wet leaves. Early morning or evening is the best time to foliar feed.

MORE IDEAS

Several recent *Sunset Magazine* issues have ideas on how to use vegetables and flowers, as well as container ideas. December 2000, page 68 "Gifts That Grow On You"; March 2001, page 104, "Summer Veggies In Pots"; and April 2001, Page 76, "Garden Magic In Baskets" are great reading. Try some of these ideas.

Throw a party, invite friends to celebrate, and show them your "garden". No more sighing over the fact there is "no place to garden where I live." HINT: Basket gardens make great gifts.

References: Creative Container Gardening by editors of Rodale Press; Gardening Hints and Tips by Pippa Greenwood; 52 Weekend Garden Projects by Nancy Bubel

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